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INFO RUCNPFUR/DARFUR COLLECTIVE
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UNCLAS KHARTOUM 000301

DEPT FOR AF/SPG, S/CRS, AF/PD, IIP/G/AF, RRU-AF, AF SE WILLIAMSON
ADDIS ABABA FOR USAU
DEPT PLS PASS USAID FOR AFR/SUDAN
NSC FOR PITTMAN AND HUDSON

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PREL KPAO OIIP SU
SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: SPECIAL ENVOY WILLIAMSON IN SUDAN

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The media reaction to Special Envoy Williamson's visit to Sudan was a rollercoaster ride, swinging wildly up and down but ultimately ending up where it began. Mirroring the GOS's hopes for the trip, the press coverage began as cautiously optimistic. After the first day's impromptu press conference at the MFA, the press heralded a "breakthrough" as the Foreign Minister announced "normalization of relations" within "4-6 months." The next day, however, State Department spokesman Tom Casey's remarks in Washington quelled the media's discussion of the "timetable." Press coverage in Khartoum waned as the Special Envoy visited Darfur and the south. Over the weekend and this Sunday, as the Special Envoy finished his trip back in Khartoum, media coverage returned to the cautious optimism it had begun with. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On February 26, the media's optimism surrounding Foreign Minister Deng Alor's comments about "normalization of relations" between the U.S. and Sudan ruled the airwaves and newspaper headlines. Most of the local Arabic papers in Khartoum, including Al-Sahafa, Al-Sudani, and Al-Rai Al-Aam, zeroed in on Alor's statements, announcing "a return of a U.S. ambassador, the lifting of... sanctions imposed on Sudan, and the clearing of Sudan from the State list of terror sponsors."

¶3. (U) Of particular note, however, was a column by Baha'el-deen Eisa, a respected senior reporter at the liberal Al-Sudani daily, who was somewhat prescient in pointing out that neither the Foreign Minister nor the Special Envoy had elaborated on exactly what steps were to be taken in bringing about "normal relations."

¶4. (U) February 27 brought forward accusations that the U.S. was "reneging on its promise" of normalization after State Department spokesman Tom Casey's remarks contradicted those of the Sudanese Foreign Minister. The press reaction, mirroring the government's, turned decidedly more negative. Foreign Ministry spokesman Ali Al-Saddiq was quoted by several papers as saying "the Special Envoy does not carry with him a 'special wand' that will resolve all the crises." In addition, Manahil Hammad, a commentator for the virulently anti-U.S. newspaper Al-Intibaha, dwelled on the low points of U.S.-Sudanese relations while Hamza Baloul, a columnist for the Al-Ahath dahly newspaper, took an economic jab, suggesting that their reporting of the Special Envoy's visit, with most papers skipping editorial commentary. Of note, however, was an opinion piece by Ayub Mohamed Abbas in the ordinarily anti-U.S. Akhir Lahza daily newspaper, in which the writer reflected positively on the Special Envoy's visit. Saying it "represented a shift in U.S. policies" and that "the Special Envoy seemed keen to contribute to efforts to realize peace in Darfur," Abbas put forward support for "the political process" and recognized Williamson's focus on "pushing for the full deployment of the a hybrid force."

FERNANDEZ